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Play at work, learning and innovation

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Abstract

Suggesting a virtuous triangle constituting public service innovation of new governances, innovation and learning, the paper examines how and why a particular mode of learning occurs: that of play. Having identified an absence of research literature on play as a catalyst for new ideas in public services, the paper argues that the diversified nature of public services and disciplinary intermixing offers fertile ground for playing with new service ideas. Our conception of play avoids functional interpretations, such as Amabile (1996) or individualising the results of play (Glynn 1994) and instead draws upon Vygotsky's (1934) social learning theory to conceptualise play as a group activity from which new ideas emerge and suggest a new framework for understanding purposive play at work and the contribution it can make to public service innovation.

27 April 2018

1 Introduction

Public service innovations are invariably accompanied by new public governances (NPGs) and always involve learning: forming a virtuous trinity. Our paper explores one mode of learning that can result in innovation and new governances: play at work. A great deal has been written about children's play and development (Piaget 1967; Paley 2009) and in general about play at work (March 1976; Weick 1979; Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Amabile 1996). Rather less research is recorded in the area of play in *service* work, though Chesbrough (2011) touches the subject. This is perverse since services now provide 80% of Europe's GDP and involve people-to-people interactions. Also, playing with and learning about innovative services requires less of the technical knowledge or specialist equipment needed to play with ideas for new physical products.

There is little research about play at work in *public* services; a gap this paper contributes towards filling; an especially important gap given the importance of public services to people's lives and (as figure-1 illustrates) the unique characteristics of public services resulting in distinctive opportunities and constraints for creativity and innovation from play at work. As Laitinen *et al* (2017a; 2017) illustrate, the fusion of services knowledge is a cauldron of innovation.

<i>Diversified product range</i>	More diversified range of services (statutory and non-statutory) than any company would consider.
<i>High proportion of professional staff</i>	Local public sector employs large numbers of professionally qualified staff including Teachers, Social Workers, Architects, Finance, Planning, and Traffic management, Pest Control, Tree Surgeons, Weights and Measures
<i>Business model</i>	The UK local Council's business model is influenced by (a) customers are prescribed and cannot be chosen; (b) annual income is artificially set and declining (Central Government austerity) and (c) the better the service the greater the demand, while income remains static and does not rise as in private firms.
<i>Co-production and empathy</i>	Services to the vulnerable, young and elderly attract professionals with high degrees of empathy and coproducing involvement by service users.

**Figure-1: Unique characteristics of local public services impacting upon play at work
(Based on Laitinen *et al* 2017 and 2017a)**

Diversification of local public services and a high proportion of professionals are potentially important for play at work, since diverse teams can assemble and exchange

experiences and ideas. This diversification point is often neglected; even acknowledging that the range of local public service varies between countries, public services are highly diversified. For example, the City of Tampere (Finland) and West Lothian (Scotland), featuring here in case studies, list some 700 services alphabetically ranging from Abandoned Vehicles to Young Carers.

We make four arguments. Firstly, local public services are fertile ground for play-related innovation since diversified services intermix staff from a variety of backgrounds. Secondly, much of the research on play at work takes a functionalist approach (Amabile 1996) or reduces play to individual cognitive activity for example Glynn (1994). Our Vygotskian social learning approach (Vygotsky 1934; Wertsch 1998; Cole *et al* 2016) grounds play in the local and public services socio-cultural context in which the play and learning occurs. Thirdly, we develop concepts relating to social learning in public services, contrasting this with alternative perspectives on learning and innovation such as competence approaches (Horton 2000) and Freeman's (1982) professionalisation of research and development (R&D); showing in the latter case that staff (and possibly users) who are not R&D specialists can play a role in radical service innovations. Finally, we suggest a new framework with which to analyse the benefits of play at work contributing to learning and innovation.

We pose two research questions: (a) can play at work in local public services contribute significantly to learning and innovation, and (b) if so, what can Senior Management do to gain benefits from play at work?

Beginning with conceptual development (definitions and previous research) we connect play with service innovation, contrasting our approach with competence theory and then offer a new framework, which after justifying method, we use to structure and analyse two cameo cases on play at work, before presenting our conclusions.

2 Concept development

2.1 Defining play

Important theorists such as Huizinga (1938) refused to offer a definition play and instead describe it as festivities enjoying a *play spirit*. Some characteristics of play are readily identifiable. It is voluntary and enjoyable (Burke 1971), and often involves rhetorics, dramatisation and pretending (Henricks 2006), creating unrealistic interpretations of imagined realities (Roos *et al* 2004); often according to Ardley (1967) like Plato and the Sophists playing with words and meanings and dramatically creating amusing fantasies and stories (Riezler 1941). Play uses flexible rules and structures (Juul 2005; Paley 2009) converting ordinary space into playspace (Eberle 2014; Larsen 2015). Play can involve *schadenfreude* (Sutton-Smith 2009). Here *deep play* (Kampmann 1997) is finding pleasure at work with mates resulting in new ideas.

2.2 Social play

Since Froebel (1895), we have understood that adult friends, partners and workmates enjoy playing, luxuriating in meandering conversations or mind games and that this is important for learning, what Meier (1988 terms *alternative modes of awareness*. In suggesting that play is an activity enjoyed for its own sake, Dewey (1909) was not suggesting that it is purposeless; instead play hones creativity and social bonding breaking down functional barriers in an amusing way (Granovetter 1973); offering what Elliot (2015) terms *timeless moments* of deep satisfaction. For March (1976:81) *Playfulness is the deliberate, temporary relaxation of rules in order to explore possibilities of alternative rules* the domain of people with time to think and muse like Plato's philosopher and Sima Qian's gentleman (Trimpi 1983). Vygotsky (1934/1987) calls these *leading activities* – imagineering that may result in emergent conceptualisations – play is cognitive, affective and verbal. It also, as Huizinga (1949) argues creates novel rules and structures. Play occurs at the threshold between reality and falsehood, what Coleridge called *that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith*. Play is festive (Huizinga 1955), occupying time and space outside of work and ordinary life, taking people into flows of 'what-ifs' (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). Albeit with structures, such as games, play entails uncertainty and surprises that entertain. It is an enjoyable journey to a goal, rather than the most efficient way route. Enjoyable play is affectively positive; it results in desirable emotions: playfulness is an *affect*, an emotional disposition: behaviour

influenced by mood (Siemer 2005; Power 2011). Today, socially interactive play can be supported and stimulated by online apps (Lynch and Redpath 2012) including some designed to aid problem solving (Marsh *et al* 2015). We have in mind play in groups; can be individual and example being Montaigne's (1991) writings.

2.3 Play at work

Of the numerous approaches to analysing play at work, we select four for review: motivation; functionalist; cognitive; and blurring work and play and flows - noting that these categories overlap.

Motivation/functional views of play

March (1976) argued that the point of work structures and rules was to suppress play at work. Contributing to the labour process debate, Burawoy (1979) describes playing the banana game at work, as a way of manufacturing consent to mind-numbing work. Glynn and Webster's (1992) Adult Playfulness Scale showed women to be more playful at work than men.

Only with the onset of more knowledge-based and service employment did play at work begin to be seen positively. Semler (2003) describes how play at work helped grow his Brazilian services company by encouraging creative thinking outside of traditional structures and authority: play he argues produces more innovative thinking than business techniques. Austin and Devin (2003) too highlight the different mindset for motivating creative people as opposed to behavioural control in structured manufacturing. Capodagli and Jackson's (2010) analysis of Pixar (Toy Story and WALL-E) is that focus on quality comes from playing, dreaming, experimenting and *never compromise on your dreams*: playing with ideas, images and feelings produces creative innovation. Isaksen *et al*'s (2000) study concludes the organisations embracing play are more innovation. Weick's (1998) point is that focusing on goals i.e. *organising* rather than organisation, is more likely to direct play towards management's privileged purpose.

Researchers such as Steyaert and Hjorth (2003) argue that play and creativity need to be liberated from crude attempts by managerialists and economists to harness its benefits. Dougherty and Takacs (2004:576) for example, suggest that management can cynically invite play at work as a control mechanism. Dodds (2014) too scathingly attacks crude attempts to hijack play as a management tool using events such as dress down days. Play then, we conclude can support creativity at work.

Cognition and play

Following Gibbons *et al* (1994) work on playful cognitive recombinations of knowledge, a stream of researchers emphasise play as way of creating new knowledge combinations using what Levy (2011) terms *therapeutic solace* to manipulate *what-ifs*, what Linkner (2011) terms *disciplined dreaming* and Smallwood (2013) mind-wandering. Amabile and Khaire (2008) are prominent in urging leaders to allow staff playtime as a route to creativity. Their view attacks the *lone inventor myth* and urges leaders to exploit bottom up ideas generation; as Sicart (2014) argues, play disrupts and creates new ideas. Purely cognitive approaches to play at work lack the referencing of social-learning meaning that cognitive streams can travel any pathway; it is not clear how ‘good’ ideas resulting from cognitive play make the transition from the head of individuals on to a change agenda.

Blurring work and play

Burke (1971) argued that some staff play at work and also work at play; these are Florida’s (2002) creative class for whom work is self-expression (Johnsen *et al* 2009). For example Sennett’s (2009) social workers who always do the best job possible out of professional pride, but whom Sennett later acknowledges feel exploited. Liebermann (1977) also argues playfulness (spontaneity, joy, humour) as opposed to play, can be self-serving. Williams (2010) suggests that blurring work and play presumes a level of self-control over work processes not always available. Walter Benjamin (1955) notes tensions between wanting the attitude of play without the activity of play. Play offers heightened *degrees of expression* enhancing creativity; *ludic* joy – light-hearted playfulness blurring work and life (Kaprow (2003).

Flow and play

Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) work on creative individuals achieving a *flow* of creativity, arriving at (1996:67) an *autotelic experience*, working/playing for oneself, being *in the zone*. He cites a range of creative individuals as examples including (1996:136) Muller and Bednorz's work on superconductivity. Another example could be Danny Kahneman and Amos Tversky laughing and joking as they assembled mental models illustrating decision rules.

Amos was always very funny and in his presence I became funny as well, so we spent hours of solid work in continuous amusement. The pleasure we found in working together made us exceptionally patient; it is much easier to strive for perfection when you are never bored (Kahneman 2011: Introduction).

For Csikszentmihalyi, (217) *harmony is brought to consciousness* by flow, a playful immersion in problem-solving, akin to the Daoist 'Way' or Merleau-Ponty's life's *meaning strategy to create meaning*.

Our perspective is similar to Csikszentmihalyi's, except we will argue that a wide range of public service staff, not confined to high-level creative individuals, can become immersed in play-flow. In doing so we are sceptical about Sørensen and Spoelstra's (2011) attempt to translate flow into a positive perspective on play at work on two counts. Firstly, their three-part model, which is intended to be a management tool, lacks grounding in learning theory and secondly, although they criticise the functionalist harnessing of play for managerial purposes, the examples they give are all managerial initiatives: team-building exercises; simulation games; puzzle-solving activities; office parties; themed dress-down days and colourful, aesthetically-stimulating workplaces. Their primary example of fake football reports amusing staff in a Dutch company is interesting, but an example of playfulness rather than play.

From our perspective, play at work is best conceptualised as pleasurable activities that sometimes flow towards serious suggestions for innovation.

2.4 Play, learning and service innovation

As we pointed out above, the service management literature includes no references to play as a source of innovation. Normann (2002:91) for example, speaks of motivating ‘personnel’ by listening to ideas and Standerfield (2002:165) is concerned to eliminate non-productive time as unallocated cost. Consultancy-level research often advises Senior Managers to listen to bottom-up ideas (Leifer *et al* 2000 and Moore 2005 are examples) without seriously considering how and why the bottom-up ideas are generated.

Following Brown and Osborne (2005) we view innovation as a new solution (in this case) to a public service users’ problem: innovation processes being non-linear and often both social and technical, the new solution often challenges existing governances and power distribution. Like many readers of PMR, we find Chesbrough’s (2011) idea of open innovation in services persuasive. He notes (68-71) that most service companies do not have specialist R&D departments and rely on interaction with users and suppliers to generate innovative ideas. He also connects service innovations with new business models, though not explicitly new governances, since his concern is with the private sector almost exclusively. Play and creativity connect best in learning environments welcoming both (Bateson 2011). Such environments are more than playful; Kuhn (1962) argues that all research is playful; this is quite different from enjoying playing with ideas for service improvement. Playing as Johnson (2010) noted, suggests an intrinsic motivation to improve. Our point is that since services in general and public services in particular are people-to-people populated with diverse professional groups, play is an obvious way to innovate, but is not researched.

2.5 Competences

Abstraction in social research can result in loss of agency (Archer 2000; 2003), and determinism (Weick 2012). Agency focuses on learning and cognition coupled with risk-taking and emotional-commitment, rather than lower-order skills and competences Leibowitz *et al* (2015), noting with Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) that in a social setting, people testing new ideas can be ridiculed.

Human resource management (HRM) seems increasingly dominated by mechanistic concepts such as human capital, social capital and competences (Horton 2000): the presumption that staff today can be trained in competences to meet tomorrow's needs (Holman and Hall 1996; Smith 2000). Powell *et al* (2013) points to the misalignment such a position can lead to and the development of managers in the public sector is criticised as being formal and insufficiently relating to the practice of managers (Khurana 2007; Locke and Spender 2011; Thomas *et al* 2012). Memon and Kinder (2016) discuss the need for Learning Managers in public services capable of constructing roles, relationships and responsibilities across disciplines and governances and involving users.

From a learning viewpoint, competence approaches can fail to use one of the most important assets local public services possess: diversity. As Bateson (1973) argues, problem-solving means *stepping outside* habituated frameworks and metaphors into new thought-worlds. Diversity in design conceptualisations invariably creates more radical innovations than competence-based teams - the key lesson from Walsh *et al*'s (1993) research. In public services, user involvement in co-design is an important source of diversity (Laitinen *et al* 2017).

We conclude that competence-based approaches to service design and innovation are less innovative than approaches based upon diversity and that local public services are blessed with a wide range of diversity.

In summary, our literature review has clarified the meaning we give to play as an inherently learning opportunity and rejected functional and purely cognitive explanation of play and its learning outcomes. We argue that enjoyment and flow feature prominently in play that results in learning. Having pointed to play as a catalyst for innovation in services as a gap in the literature, we suggest that the diversity of experiences found amongst local public sector staff presents major opportunities for play to stimulate innovations. In doing so, we criticise competence-based approaches to HRM, suggesting that play as it relates to service innovation benefits from stepping outside of conventional thought-worlds. We

now turn to using this approach in building a new framework for understanding the role of play in local public service innovation.

3 Framework development

Our framework is rooted in Vygotsky's (1934) socio-cultural theory of learning. As Nardi (1996) points out, learning for Vygotsky always unifies consciousness and everyday activities: learning is always social and never confined to only cognition as Piaget (1967) argued. Nor is learning simply behavioural responses as Bandura (1986) suggests, which, is more appropriate to training and coaching. What and how learning occurs depends on context (Engeström 1996; 2014); objective structures cannot determine sense-making learning outcomes. Daniels *et al* (2007) note that for Vygotsky the playfulness of a context varies (age, emotions, social setting, interests) - we create our own playgrounds. Play becomes a *leading activity* because we express ourselves in language (spoken and not), we have to think about what others say and make new meanings; this is easily seen in children's' development of metaphors and frameworks. Ascribing imagined meanings for fun; play as children get older means making rules, negotiating meanings – experimenting, imagining. As Hoff (2013) notes, for Vygotsky (1930) deep learning is only possible after learned frameworks and metaphoric thinking builds on pretend play and object substitution (stick – horse), imaginary worlds.

This approach aligns with other pedagogic theory. Gibson's (1979) idea of *affordances* in learning i.e. enablers or facilitators of learning are important since, play around public service ideas presumes for example that individuals from different disciplines come together, have time to play and can readily communicate: affordances matter.

One aspect of play in public services we will draw attention to is language used. For example client, patient, pupil, criminal, citizen – may all represent the same person, illustrating different service thought-corridors. As Wertsch (1991) points out, Wittgenstein's idea of *language games* is close to Vygotsky's mediational role of language i.e. playing with meanings to achieve shared understanding. Apparent agreement in use of same words disguises differences and finding out differences is the game.

Play presumes trust and mutual respect. Wertsch (1985; 1998) discusses the contradiction between alterity (exchanging one's perspectives for those of another) and inter-subjectivity (dialogue transcending each other's private worlds). For Bodrova and Leong (1998) activity system artefacts are mental objects for mediation to bounce against. These then are the theoretical roots of our framework, to which we now turn.

3.1 Framework

Figure-2 presents a conceptual framework for analysing play, as it is associated with learning and innovation in local public services. Here we construct the framework, explaining the variables and their causal relationships, after which we show how the framework operates as part of a flow in practice. Finally, in this section we compare the framework with an alternative, Sørensen and Spoelstra's (2011) three-part model.

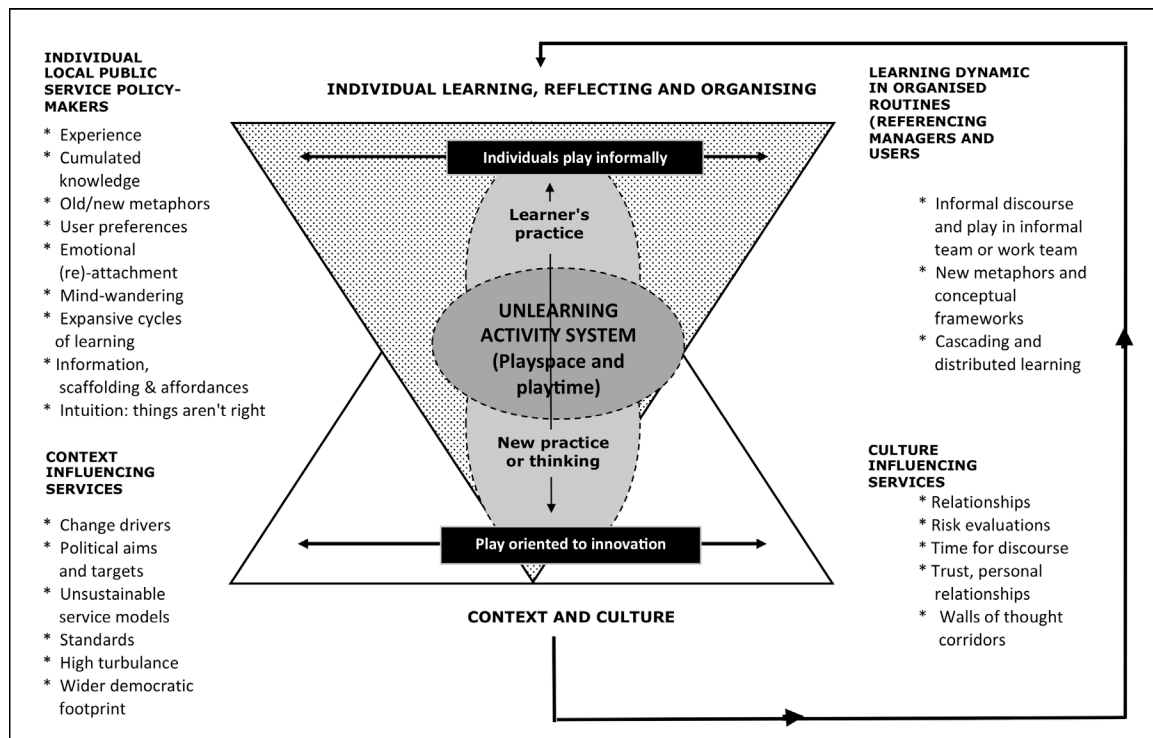


Figure-2: Play activity system (Based on Vygotsky 1934; Engeström 1998 and Illeris 2004)

Figure-2 is based on Vygotsky's (1934) social learning theory, adapted from Illeris' (2004) model and including Engeström's (1998) idea of ever-deepening *expansive learning*

cycles: in this case play with words and ideas moving towards thought experiments and piloted experiments. The top inverted triangle represents individuals learning within a social setting, in this case the learning environment constituting playspace; it links with the bottom triangle representing the context (public service organisation and its institutional setting) and culture (social influences) in which the playing and learning occur. At the intersection of the triangles is the activity system, what Vygotsky terms a *zone of proximal development*: here agent's experiences, emotional attachments and ideas mediate with play words, metaphors, ideas and suggestions – the playing and learning. Emotional attachments to old ways-of-working and the struggle to express in clear words feelings about what new ways-of-working might be like, is why metaphors and analogies figure prominently in learning: we know more than we can express (Damasio 2003; Holodynski *et al* 2013). Successful play will result in new metaphors or ideas for service innovation: a new thought corridor (Douglas' 1986 term). Agents enter the playspace because they are motivated to improve what they consider intuitively to be unsatisfactory services. Note we are constructing a framework not a model: our causal relationships are exploratory and not predictive and may not each be present in every case.

3.2 Variables of play in public services

Individuals on the top-left of figure-1 have formal knowledge of the service and experienced in its delivery. Reflecting on this they intuitively know that the service could be improved. They begin playing with their own cognitions, often clashing ideas and values, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue into new metaphors. Their mood (way of being in the service world, Heidegger 1938) is positive; in Bateson's (1973) terms they are framing issues associated with the service in ways to improve it. Baas *et al's* (2008) meta-study reveals that rather than serenity inducing creativity, positive mood is more associated with creativity. Often what hold individuals back, as Vygotsky (1934) notes is an emotional attachment to old ways-of-working, in particular the roles, relationships and responsibilities to which they are habituated: learning evokes passion as Wenger *et al* (2002) found. Cognitive play, often takes the form of mind-wandering, since as Smallwood (2013) notes, unconscious cognitions constitute some 50% of our thoughts. As divergent new thinking (Rus 2003) crystallises, individuals begin to share ideas, entering the

playspace occupied by others of similar inclination. Memon and Kinder (2017) demonstrate using public service partnership cases that deliberate and strategic co-locating of services allows for shared accountabilities, improved learning and innovation (i.e. ideas sharing and experimenting) amongst groups of professionals.

Organisation of playspace will often be coffee-breaks, lunches or informal chats following team or project meetings creating the small group ‘discovery’ method of learning Roger’s (1969) developed. There is sufficient structure (including fun) to hold the group together, but as Derrida (1970) argues it remains *rupture free* i.e. as Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) argue, exchanges build and rely on mutual trust and acceptance of participant’s vulnerability. The group play and distribute in a playful manner ideas, criticisms and new metaphors. There may be in Weick’s (1979) terms *combinatorial flexibility*: the novel recombination of thoughts expressed, to use Searle’s (1969) terms illocutionary acts; speech acts; performative language: the group has fun.

Context shapes all learning, as Engeström (1996) insists. In this case as play moves towards concrete ideas for service innovation, the voice of context will be heard: standards, organisational goals, accountabilities and of course, user preferences. The point of flow is that useful play begins to concretise ideas into either new service metaphors or models and looks towards experimentation without risk (Brown 2010). As we intend to illustrate with captured narratives, a critical factor in successful play is diversity, stress on local public sector (Hjorth 2005).

Culture socially shapes play by providing language, learning frameworks and concepts (Ledin *et al* 2017). As Carr and Luken (2014) note playscapes are free flowing and induce fun and happiness, the pace and direction of the ideas-flow depends on time available, the degree of trust in participant relationships and the perceived risks involved in the service delivery. Within the activity system humour and playfulness along with a shared ‘mood’ to improve are the glue holding the group together. Play in this cultural setting involves the witty, cunning playful combinations to which De Certeau (1984) refers. Jokes depend on shared context sometimes a colliding view of context (Forabosco 1992); laughter signals

positive mood (Kipper and Todt 2005) and quells discord. Since Plato and Sophists as Marrou (1956) notes, laughing at sillinesses in your own position and those of others is a sure way to learn. The group are now discounting ideas, mulling them over; unlike formal groups rushing to meet goals and rejecting ideas having less time for metaphoric thinking. Play may only slowly develop ideas for service innovation, once they do; they're in a hurry to test them. In short, a play culture encourages iconoclasm, Foucault's other spaces: heterotopias. In such spaces, Tomasello (1999:81) notes, people are often imitative in language and gestures and in behaviour tending towards a comfortable mean.

3.3 How our framework operates

Figure-2 representing our conceptual framework is situated at the centre of figure-3 illustrating how play flows. We employ a football analogy (pre-match, game-on and post-match) to denote as simplified flow of play-learning and service innovation.

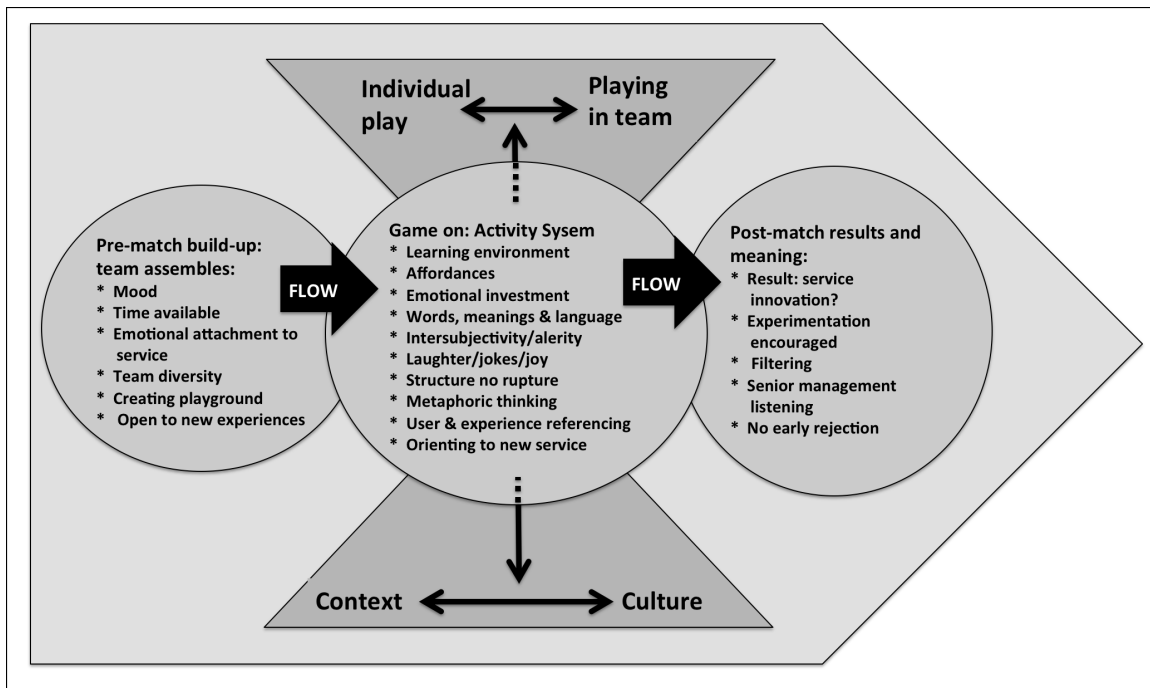


Figure-3: Flow showing play, learning and innovation in informal activity system flowing through pre-match, game-on and post-match cycles

Pre-match build-up calls upon emotions, knowledge, affordances and diversity. Agents intuitively know services can be improved, have a mood to do so and an emotional attachment to service outcomes. They bring into the playspace their own cognitive ability

supported by specialist knowledge and service experience. Affordances enabling the playspace include time and the ability to meet and communicate. Importantly, there is a diversity of knowledge and experience present due to the diversified nature of local public services and the professionals working in them.

The game-on activity system is a simplified version of figure-2. Flow from pre-match to post-match is a learning journey arising from the group's play. For example after a project meeting a policeman, teacher, social worker and child psychiatrist begin joking with each other about attitudes to young people. It becomes a regular playspace. Play leads to learning. Eventually, ideas on service innovation concretise flow into the post match results. Here the flow is a transition from new ideas or metaphors towards suggests or experimental pilots; essentially this second flow in figure-3 is distributed learning, in this case arising from play.

Post-match results and meaning involves distributing learning amongst colleagues and proposing piloting experiments to Senior Management. The flow here is from 'good idea' to suggested innovation. At this stage colleagues with other specialisms may join the team and a formal project team may be constituted. For the original playmates, the pleasure of the *play spirit* may just continue.

3.3 Alternative frameworks

We are firmly of the view with Nardi *et al* (2017) that research should challenge conventional explanations, if not to reject, then to sharpen up arguments. There are alternative frameworks and our view is that if they produce results for managers then use them. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework come from the same tradition. The basic idea is that socially-situated learning engages with practice by focusing on purposive learning, privileging particular goals that require active participation, (non-legitimate, peripheral or core participation) in *communities of practice*; exemplified by Brown and Duguid (1991) and Wenger *et al.* (2002). This approach is criticised (eg by Contu and Willmott 2003) for de-centring individual cognitions and emotional attachments (Engeström *et al* 1999) and ignoring power relations between the communities of practice

(Contu and Willmott 2003). Our framework includes individual cognitions and in distributed learning references power relations.

We considered using Hughes' (2002) children's play taxonomy, which is deeply thoughtful and useful. His sixteen categories include symbolic play, socio-dramatic play, fantasy and exploratory play. He builds on Huizinga's (1938) insights that play invites creatively establishing new structures and rules. We decided however, that we needed an approach based upon learning and flow: to show how play can transition from fun to innovative ideas.

Sørensen and Spoelstra's (2011) three-mode model, seeks to demonstrate the beneficial effects of play in company learning processes postulating play as continuation (work and play intertwine and are not separate), intervention (challenging by mimicry the existing order) and usurpation (creating narratives challenging to the parent organisation). Where play is subverting an organisation (in their case because of corruption), this approach seems valuable, however, our interest is in service innovation resulting from learning-by-playing and Sørensen and Spoelstra's (2011) framework insufficiently capture the interplay between individual, organisation, context and culture shaping outcomes.

4 Method

Our research is exploratory, interpretivist using narratives (Czarniawska 1997). Following Lapsley and Llewellyn (1995) we use *real life constructs*, in the form of narratives created by interviewees; vignettes, which we then interpret in the light of context and previous research literature, represented by our conceptual development and framework. There are no social facts awaiting discovery (Crossley *et al* 1984; Rabinow and Sullivan 1985), instead from interviewee narratives, we create what Rorty (1989:73) calls *knowing and doing in praxis* and Yanow (2000) *meaning making* capturing as Saunders *et al* (2007:84) suggest the *meanings motivating people's actions*.

Each author selected an example of play at work, identified from previous research. Cases from a Finnish Hospital, and Scot-Council local government provide cross-referencing of play at work between the hospital and local government contexts and the Finnish and

Scottish cultures, introducing the diversity Yin (2009) recommends. In the case of Finland the innovation is caring for newborn babies at home supported peripatetically by hospital nursing staff. The Scottish innovation was an integration of children at risk services involving police, education and social work.

In each case we adopted the cognitive conversation conventions recommended by McDowell (1998) inviting interviewees to use their own terminologies, sequencing and causal connections. Author and Author conducted nine interviews in April 2017 at Tampere Hospital; between May and September 2017 Author returned and again re-interviewing as a group six of the nurses previously interviewed: a total of ten interviews.

We present the two narratives structured to give comparability and coherence by the flow proposed in figure-3.

Following the conventions of narrative analysis, suggested by Bryman and Bell (2007) and Elliot (2005) we considered in-case coherence, cross-case comparison, followed by triangulation with previous research.

Our work is non-interventionist receiving level-1 ethical consent in Finland.

5 Narratives of play at work, learning and innovation

5.1 Play in Scot-Council

ScotCouncil is a small local authority in Scotland, providing a wide range of services. It's performance culture encourages continuous improvement. Our narrative begins after a key innovation: the co-location of major services in one new building including Senior Management, Education, Social Services, Police, Finance, Transport and Justice. Figure-4 gives an overview of the story.

Our first get together was over coffee, then we started lunches, but we realised we all worked in the same building, so nearly everyday some of us would meet, says R-B. They called me the Laughing Policeman, said R-C, but by our third lunch, we laughed till we

cried. Language was the leading activity: *clients/pupils/baddies* were the words. R-A's jovial personality was imitated by the other two, *joking brought out our prejudices*, R-B recalls. Playfulness often contrasted self-perceptions with images from other perspectives. At one time R-C said that teachers felt more intimidated than pupils when Police or Social Work visited a school. Continuous references to user stories fed into team discourse.

By the second month, talk moved to what-ifs: *I remember the time we said Social Workers should have army uniforms and when R-A said we should lock-up the Social Workers instead of the kids. God we laughed*, R-C remembers. They fooled around with handcuffs and once spent a coffee break handcuffed together. Although in the same building, most staff phoned or emailed people in different organisations: not these three – at every opportunity they visited each other and soon became known and welcomed by other staff. *Here comes your educated Policeman*, one Teacher's colleague said.

After two months barriers were down and conversations deepened to how to better help children at risk. *We had a hundred ideas a week*, said R-3, *but soon took the plunge and began to talk about a joint memo to our Heads*. Looking for early service integration 'wins' from the new collocated HQ, little did the group know they would become an exemplar: Senior Managers loved them and within four months formal joint project teams were established on sharing information, joint assessments and coordinating actions, including IT specialists and semi-judicial officials (Children's Panel). The fun group still met and became the 'conscience' of the project team. *We'd gone through the barriers*, R-2 says, *trusting each other, everyone knew we were determined to change things*. Some people still call them *the three musketeers*. In a reflective moment, R-A said, *It was one of the most satisfying experiences of my professional life*.

Key people playing	*	Police Superintendent (Respondent-A)
	*	Social Work Team Leader (Criminal Justice) (R-B)
	*	Teacher (Children at Risk project leader) (R-C)
Playspace	*	Weekly working lunch, lots of corridor chats
	*	Co-located in different sections of same building: shared social space
Service innovation following play	*	Changed siloed concepts: trajectory of service coordination
	*	Early gains: mutual trust/understanding; shared databases with online Children at Risk registers, reports leading to joint assessments
Pre-match events/flow	*	Accidental assemble (<i>lets have coffee</i>) of diverse team of players
	*	Player's positive mood: willing to re-examine emotional attachments: found themselves open to flow from play to ideas and suggested innovations
	*	Playfulness bonded group, play explored presumptions and attachments
Game-on events/flow	*	Players enjoyed diversity from other's experiences and knowledge
	*	Players stepping outside existing individual/organisation roles and relationships, adopting user perspective (Children at risk)
	*	Play soon exposed existing emotional attachments and relationships as inadequate: flow towards innovative ideas
	*	Positive affordances: time, communications, proximity
	*	Intuitively know service can improve
Examples of play and fun	*	Toys: exchanging forms and online procedures enabling agents to peek into the worlds of other agents
	*	Jokes, laughing, visits
	*	<i>Laughing Policeman; laughed till we cried</i>
Post-match events/flow	*	Learning easily distributed to Senior Managers and colleagues, who established formal project team
	*	Other specialists eager to join team (eg IT)
	*	Working across disciplines legitimate and fun
	*	Team had fun flowing from play to innovative ideas

Figure-4: Summary of ScotCouncil playspace

5.2 Tampere University Hospital - maternity nurses

Tampere University Hospital provides demanding specialized care services to over one million Finns. The services include many medical specialities from emergency care to rehabilitation.

In this case study we especially are focusing on midwifery. More than 5,000 children are born in Tampere University Hospital annually. The hospital has been concentrating on not

only the reliability and function of the care processes but also on involving the patients in the services. This case study is based on interviews with fifteen people in ten interviews (one being a return interview of six nurses). Two of the nine were doctors and the rest were nurses or health science specialists.

At the Tampere University Hospital playing was participated by doctors, superiors, nurses, and patients alike. Especially important in playing are the wards. They constitute intimate communities where interaction between workers is primarily taking place. Each ward usually have their '*own humour*', i.e. their own distinct way of internal communication. Primarily this is interaction between colleagues, like nurses. Playing does also exist across hierarchical boundaries. The decisive factor being the personality of the doctors higher up in the hierarchy: as one of the interviewed doctors (D1) said, the aim to enhance the user-orientation of services has led to increased interaction with the workers. Still, a professional must heed to ethics when interacting with patients. *In these situations misunderstandings are easily created.*

Above all, playing takes place in working communities and during working hours in nearly all formal and informal situations. The venues for playing can include meetings, corridor conversations as well as waiting together for an operation to begin or for a patient to arrive in the emergency ward – any situation where you have some extra time to spend. Lunch breaks have their own special character. Doctors and nurses are usually sitting at their own tables and lightly *talking shop*, also interacting with users: hugging babies, joking with mums and dramatically re-enacting dilemmas situations.

Hospital workers emphasize the difference between work and leisure. As one interviewee (N7) proposed: *we wouldn't mind going to the pub together if we got paid for it.* This suggests that leisure is spent on work-related playing.

Playing is spontaneous, but also conscious and planned. Methods, such as the ways of drama or service formulation, can be utilized as conscious procedures at common development days, for instance.

Key people playing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Group of maternity nurses, lots of new mums * Later maternity doctors, community health visitors and social workers
Play space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Hospital ward and nurses' room * Meetings * Development days * Restaurants
Service innovations following play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * New kinds of professional practices at work * Integrated, professional service processes * Healthy babies allowed to leave hospital after birth with mothers * Nurse's role changes from 'hugging babies' to educating mums
Pre-match events/flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * All but intensive care babies leaving hospital with mothers * Integrated service arrangements for care at home, including community health visitors and social workers
Game-on events/flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Difficult situations with customers * People are "tired at work" * Service design * <i>We knew from talking with mums that keeping babies in hospital was wrong, it felt wrong.</i> * We loved hugging babies
Examples of play and fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Nurses and doctors joking amongst themselves * Stories of play with mothers (educating them) * Joke or story * Drama * Play with community-based professionals
Post-match events/flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * New kinds of practices at work * Babies at home * Home not hospital-based care * Integration with other professions

Figure-5: Summary of Tampere Hospital playspace

There are plenty of playful working modes in formal and informal situations in hospitals. However, playing that leads to actual service innovations usually takes place in formal – planned and conducted – situations. Shifting from 'good' or playful new idea to implementing a defined innovation, particularly in a risk-laden hospital setting, involves moving ideas into formal practice domains and incrementally experimenting with controlled small scale changes – this is what happened with baby care in Tampere Hospital. Hospitals offer functional care practices that affect the actions of everyone. Innovations can be improving practices related to internal processes – such as the reception processes for women arriving to give birth – or of professional nature, such as practices related to storing implements. Especially innovations related to patient orientation have become

more common due to the new kind of service thinking. Playing not connected to innovations is related to coping with workload or alleviating stressful situations: *The tougher the situation the harder the humour (N8)*. Also, you can use humour to test work-related ethical questions, such as the limits of serving a patient: "We won't tell the spouse that he should obey the patient about to give birth, and bring pizza!"

Playing has a meaning in the development innovations and operation. Some *wild joke* can germinate an insight that things could be done in a different way. *Those generate good ideas, when someone says: Hey, what if..., like what if we didn't use this cabinet (for storing implements and medicines)... and then someone starts thinking, what if we didn't have them, what would we do. And then there were all kinds of suggestions on how to manage things... if we can't do this, then what can we do... none of this would exist if someone hadn't said, shall we do this (N9)*. Play then ate away at Doctor-knows-best, delegitimising the idea of keeping babies in hospital and incrementally developing parents and nurses' ability and expectation to care for babies in the home: play became practice.

Humour can be used to test ideas. If an idea is not met with sympathetic response, you can say that it was just humour. *It is easier to take back something when you have presented it jokingly*. Humour and stories can be used when taking up difficult issues. On development days, for instance, humour can lighten up the atmosphere, which enables discussion on innovations. Even with harder humour it is possible to teach and convey information. *A standard joke, when asking the patient to undress below the waist, is to explain how it is done*.

6 Discussion

In-case and cross-case

As real-life constructs (Lapsley and Llewellyn 1995), the Scot-Council and Tampere Hospital stories hang together: they have integrity as stories since real people are describing their real-life experiences featuring ludic joyfulness and playfulness. *Meaning making* (Yanow 2000) arose after and as a result of the fun with mates: bottom up problem solving

outside of *habituated frameworks* (Bateson 1973) unencumbered by artificial top-down efficiency searching.

Across the cases whatever the Guidebooks say about dour Scots or un-expressive Finns, we find these are serious, experienced and responsible professionals joyful at work, sometimes even when (Tampere) waiting to go into the Theatre, playing with words, situation and eventually new service solutions. The play situations and structures are informally constructions in corridors and coffee lounges (Huizinga 1938) with impromptu rules over-riding hierarchic or professional constraints. In both case interactions with, and references to, user experiences catalyse disbelief suspension and play with situational comedy, found in both the hierarchic hospital and the co-located Council. Across cases (health and local Government) both stories feature committed professionals coming together to play around what services are and what they might be.

Individuals and teams

Play by doctors and nurses (Finland), police and social works (Scotland) is shown to be workmates having fun at each other's language, formalisms and procedures: *joking brought out our prejudices; lock-up the Social Workers; we laughed till we cried; creating our own humour*. Note that as Vygotsky suggests and figure-2 illustrates, the sense (or nonsense) –making, begins with individual cognitions, seeing ironies or experimenting with new metaphors. Even in a closely bonded team, collective learning is a metaphor – all learning begins with individual cognitions, which are then inter-subjectively distributed often in thought-experiments. The teams developed mediating agency, selecting and amplifying humorous episodes or terms; there is no *lone inventors* (Amabile and Khaire 2008); individual fun only results in legitimate *new thought corridors* with team approval. Individual fun becomes a *leading activity* (Vygotsky 1934/1987) it is the team's acceptance of the irony or new metaphor that gives life (rather than discards) new thinking.

Context-culture

Essentially the Finnish story is one of professional home care rather than hospital care and the Scottish story one of local service integration. Functional barriers (Dewey 1909)

succumb to informal ludic interactions, *blurring* work and life (Kaprow (2003) despite the danger of misunderstandings (Tampere Doctor) or heritage of strangeness and feeling intimidated (Scottish Teacher). Like all vibrant knowledge networking both contexts are characterised by requisite variety; in this case the varied experiences of diverse professionals and their service users. Diversity and a culture of wanting service improvements explain the success of these play-spaces (Carr and Luken 2014). We note in that some specialist private services such diversity is absent or less apparent. Also, the play-spaces are an organic bottom-up and informal creation by the professionals: there is no evidence of the sort of top-down, manipulated improvement teams that Steyaert and Hjorth (2003) criticise. Although the Finnish group refer to external R&D for legitimisation, the radical service improvements resulting from these playful interactions is far removed from professionalised R&D, reflecting the informal people-centred and subjective nature of service experiences.

Both Finnish healthcare and Scottish local Government have extended hierarchies, reflecting the risk-laden and complex services they deliver. However, in both cases play transcends hierarchic roles and power and acts to legitimate and shape new ideas. Perhaps play, like multi-disciplinary and multi-level team working, acts to democratise ideas and erode connections between bureaucratic position and the value of ideas?

Flow

In terms of figure-3, a pre-match stage assembles the team and constructs the play-space and then flows into a game-on activity system; Vygotsky's term for cognitions, coupled to adjusted emotional attachments and the re-assessment of inherited metaphors and the sense made of experience, to take account of new learning. New learning comes from the experiences, frameworks and values of other professionals and service users brought into the play-space. If the pre-match phase jocularly identifies problems, the match-on activity system frames the problems by creating a harmony and shared consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi 1997:217), using play as an affordance to interrogate 'what-ifs' and new thought corridors (Douglas 1986). This is a *structure with no rupture* (Derrida 1970) in the sense that the team has bonded to create new solutions moving from a *hundred ideas a*

week (Scotland) to talking shop outside of hierarchy, but within care standards and practices (Finland). Without flow to post-match results and meanings, the team would remain a joyful learning environment. The flow into results and meaning crystallises innovative new service solutions: from *laughing policeman* to *three musketeers* championing change (Scotland) and from *wild joke* to *suggestions how to manage things* in Finland.

These are not project groups moving to stipulated milestones; language and metaphors plays an important mediating role in flow from problem or issue identification, into problem framing and inter-textual data exchange towards new service solutions. Mind-wandering (Smallwood 2013) and metaphoric thinking (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) create the flow: flow towards the trinity of learning, innovation and new governances – all bundled together.

Our argument is not that play-related innovation *may* result in new governances; instead we are arguing that it *necessarily* results in new governances. In the case of Finland entirely shifting the care focus from the hospital to home, from Doctors-know-best to mums-at-the-centre and from hospital hierarchy towards the inclusion of care-in-the-community professionals. Scottish players helped created the new governances associated with shared services to children: shared data and records, shared assessment and shared care delivery; eventually, (though not part of our story) shared budgets and sharing design choices with services users. We interpret Derrida's (1970) *structure* as referring to values and desired outcomes – in these the cases show no rupture, rather a reappraisal foregrounding service intent. The rupture is not in the service values, rather in the ways-of-working i.e. delivering services. Seeing new solutions outside of existing service patterns, using new combinations of learning arising from play legitimates the new governances. In going back to service basics, old governances are necessarily exposed, re-evaluated and adjusted. The very act of playing language games and paring back the services to core values challenges existing governances: it cannot be that new arrangements occur using the old governances, since roles, relationships and responsibilities are changed in the new service arrangements. Play widens the openness of open innovation with

emergent solutions being pulled by the efficacy of new solutions and less ordered by heritage and emotional attachments eg roles, relationships and responsibilities. Playful learning and innovation exposes old governances to challenge and necessarily results new governances: a new Trinity.

7 Conclusions

Our article began by calling attention to the virtuous trinity of learning, innovation and new governances, suggesting that play at work can bring unity of purpose to the trinity. This purposiveness embeds proven values, in the new roles and a relationship required by innovative new service solutions, and always results in new governances, especially with the inclusion of service users in delivery. At times the new solution and accompanying governances will be incremental changes, at other time, as our two cases illustrate, radical innovations and new governances. Overall our conclusion is to point to the positive benefits of purposive play at work.

Research questions

Can play at work in local public services contribute significantly to learning and innovation? Yes. Our two cases illustrate how fun play can flow into an activity system the result of which are concrete proposals to alter service arrangements that combine the learning and experience of diverse professionals and service users. Of course, not all play at work flows span the figure-3 phases; just as not all programmed innovation project or top-down initiatives result in beneficial change.

What can Senior Management do to gain benefits from play at work? Our work on unlearning and service innovation (Kinder and Stenvall 2017) concluded that Senior Management has many levers to promote radical innovations and that often these are not programmed or top-down innovation initiatives. Rather, Senior Management can create learning *affordances* by giving staff time and opportunity to think and interact: co-location, joint working, ideas and reports. Such approaches are particularly apposite in services where relationalities between providers and with service users characterise both service

deliver and it re-design. As Chesbrough (2011) notes, open innovation in services revolves around openness to the ideas and experiences of other people. From this current research, we draw similar conclusions to our earlier contribution. Our unlearning work emphasised individual cognitions arising from mind-wandering and sharing new service metaphors with teams. Here our emphasis is on the way playful teams actually stimulate the mind-wandering and new metaphors and then in play sift ideas, combine ideas and rapidly move from playing towards new service solutions. For management the main implication is that public services can exploit the diversity of professional's knowledge and experiences by encouraging playful interactions and offering a listening ear to off-the-wall new solutions. Of course, some staff simply want to work and go home having fulfilled their commitment without engaging in playfulness or other activities associated with instigating innovation. Good Managers know those staff interested and capable of generating innovative ideas and will encourage them.

Theoretical contribution

We have argued that play can be important in a trinity of learning, innovation and new governances. Underlying this approach is the view the public service innovation occupies distinctive ground - the diversity of professional and users experience and knowledge which when interacting can create radical new service solutions. Our approach centrally features Vygotsky's (1934) socio-cultural learning model (figure-2) and a new framework. We have contrasted this framework with programmed and top-down innovation initiatives and argued that play as a catalyst is counter-posed to traditional arguments such as innovation depending on competences (Horton 2000) or professionalised R&D (Freeman 1982). Indeed, play in our framework is more akin to the tinkering inventions from the pre-industry era. Our framework differs from functionalist approaches to service innovation (Amabile 1996); rooting learning and innovation in a public services context and culture and not simply reducing it to individual cognitive activity, as for example Glynn (1994) emphasises. Play involving language games, jocular what-ifs and new metaphors, is shown in figure-3 to flow from intuitive and emotional problem identification, to a "game-on" phase of new cognitions, the sharing of new knowledge combinations and then into a "post-match" phase of planning and implementation. We employ Derrida's

(1970) *structure without rupture* idea to show that play opens up innovative learning structures by referencing inherited or emotionally important values, which are given disruptive new life in new service solutions involving new governances. Play, as a stimulant of the learning-innovation-governances Trinity, is a form of action learning clashing ideas and experiences in a manner less controlled and more open than planned projects or adopted new techniques. Our theoretical contribution is a new framework, which though only yet tested against illustrative case studies, may have wider generic use for understanding innovation processes in public services.

Management practice implications

As indicated above, our conclusions for management practice are similar to those for unlearning (Laitinen 2017). Celebrating and legitimating play as a source of learning and innovation may encourage diverse teams of staff to cohere. This might involve promoting ideas emanating from play-spaces and openly placing new metaphors on agendas for discussion. As in the Scottish example, co-location is likely to facilitate this process. Most importantly, in our view, Senior Management can promote emotional commitment to values and service users as separated from commitment to particular forms of organisation and governance: to structure without rupture. All deep learning involves renegotiating emotional commitments, where Senior Management's actions and comments facilitate this; with staff likely to more easily think freely and radically. Some of these practical implications are found in Wenger's communities of practice (such as boundary hopping people and ideas), however, we give more emphasise to individual cognitions and mind-wandering.

Further research

Our validity claim is one of usefulness rather than generalisable truth-hood; further research of an exploratory nature may identify quantitatively measurable variables. We suggest four area of further research: firstly a quantitative study of the extent to which play is a part of learning and innovation in public services; secondly a study of the extent to which interactions by diverse sets of professionals effects innovation, perhaps exploring the extent to which diversity is a hidden asset in the public sector; and thirdly, particular

affordances within management's discretion supporting purposive play. Finally, our sample size of two is illustrative – foundation for further research – justified here by an initiation of argument; much more evidence is required to draw definitive conclusions.

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